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ABSTRACT

Development of the Oregon Small Schools Program is traced against the background of other small-school projects, such as the Western States Small Schools Project and the Texas Small Schools Project. Information is given on the various procedures involved in the organizatcn's development and on problems (e.g., high turnover of teachers and high per-pupil cost) which have been identified in the Oregon small schools. Evidence is presented which indicates that the project has consistently directed its efforts toward the initial objectives and has achieved these purposes remarkably well; at the same time, the project has established a pattern of improvement of rural and small-school education which is exemplary and which indeed has pointed out the direction that other states may follow if the effort to preserve the best in rural living is to be sustained in the nation. (DK)

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HISTORY OF THE OREGON SMALL SCHOOLS PROGRAM

[1969]

Today approximately fifteen million children 18 years and under are educated in rural public schools throughout our nation. These generally small schools are quite often very isolated from population centers and, although the percentage of rural youth is declining, when compared to figures on urban and suburban youngsters 5 - 18 years old, the number remains constant.[1]

Generally, small rural schools are inadequate. Additionally, rural youngsters still take their limited educations with them when seeking the implied benefits of city life. As a consequence, the often limited academic and vocational preparation of rural students continues to offset national efforts to achieve excellence for all people.[2]

Fortunately, the problem has its challengers. Speculation on ways to provide an improved education led a group of states and school districts in the Nation to form associations to seek better educations for the educationally disadvantaged in isolated small schools.[3]

The principal objective of the group is to eliminate isolation and sparse enrollments as excuses for lack of high quality in grade school and high school education. The thinking is that wherever possible the school districts should be increased in size to satisfy the need for minimum administrative efficiency. However, with full awareness that merely planning districts with more square miles is not assurance of high quality instruction, the plans also call for experiments which help teachers and principals seek some natural advantages of low pupil-teacher ratios.[4]

As the projects developed in the mid-1950s the approach was relatively simple but, even so, brand-new. In one case it was the formation of an association of schools and colleges in New York state, the Catskill Area Project in Small School Design. In another statewide approach, a state department of education adopted an agressive attitude by establishing a project staff, with responsibility to promote experimentation and instructional improvement in the isolated, small schools. This was the Rocky Mountain Area Project for Small High Schools formed in Colorado. Both the R.M.A.P. and the C.A.P. received initial momentum through a grant from the Fund for the Advancement of Education. Both based their approach on the idea that improved small, rural schools would be achieved through major and multiple overhauls of the instructional and organizational system. Both projects insisted that isolated small schools needed to reassess and redesign programs and reshape teachers' classroom behavior as a result of studied organizational capacities--not out of need to copy designs imposed by state or regional standards which were developed chiefly for urban and suburban schools of 1,000 or more students. Both stressed work with regular teaching in regular small schools.[5]

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In 1962, the Western States Small Schools Project was formed, this time with assistance from the Ford Foundation directly, to encompass a five-state region. The new approach, a formal association of state departments of education, was established primarily to create experimental programs throughout the region so that the results of innovation could more effectively be transferred to nonproject schools and to other state departments.

The W.S.S.S.P. required not only a commitment of boards and staffs from isolated small schools, but it included an expression by state education agencies of a responsibility to provide creative leadership and to stimulate invention and educational change. Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah were the charter and present members.[7] Other small school projects throughout the Nation started about this same time were the Coteau Hills Project in North Dakota and the Texas Small Schools Association.

Oregon has a relatively large number of small high schools. During the 1961-62 school year there were 25 high schools which had an average daily membership of fewer than 50 students. An additional 27 schools had an average daily membership between 50 and 100 students. These 52 schools comprised 23.9 percent, or nearly a fourth,of the State's 218 high schools. There is considerable evidence that the quality of education in these small high schools is considerably below that of larger schools.[8]

For many years individuals and organizations in Oregon have been interested in the unique problems of the small high school. The Oregon Association of Secondary School Principals and the Intermediate Superinentendents Organization have had committees working in this area for several years. Individuals in the State Department also showed interest. Dr. John Conway, Dr. Minear, and Dr. Willard Bear have conducted studies showing interest in working with small schools to help them improve their programs. Members of the Secondary Section of the State Department of Education have worked with school administrators over the years in an effort to improve the educational opportunities for those students who reside in small towns.[9]

The interests and efforts of these people and organizations were brought to focus in March of 1964 when the State Department of Education organized the Small School Advisory Design Committee. The members of this committee included: Mr. Joey Acaiturri, Superintendent of Schools at Vernonia; Dr. Willard Bear, Assistant Superintendent in charge of Instruction in the State Department; Mrs. Lucile Dickey, Principal, Mohawk High School, Marcola; Mr. Robert Eddy, Superintendent, Baker Intermediate Education District, and a representative of the I.E.D. Superintendents' Small School Committee; Dr. Arthur C. Hearn, University of Oregon; Dr. Errett Hummel, Portland State College; Mr. Otis Murry, Superintendent of Schools, Pine-Eagle District; Mr. Dennis Patch, Division of Administrative Services, State Department of Education; Mr. Thomas Rigby, Oregon School Boards Association;

Dr. Cliff Robinson, Superintendent of Schools, Klamath County School District; Mr. Warren Adams, Assistant Superintendent of the Clackamas County I.E.D.; Mr. Leo R. Crisman, Superintendent of Schools, Elkton; and Dr. Carlos Easley, Eastern Oregon College. Dr. James Ellingson, State Department of Education, and Dr. George Kontos, Division of Education Development, State Department of Education, were added to the committee later.[10]

"The original purpose of the committee was to develop a proposal or proposals for the continual improvement of instruction in Oregon's small high schools."[11] It was hoped that a proposal would be submitted to and accepted by some funding agency or that State money would be available for this purpose by the Legislature. Initially it was felt the first duty of the committee was to determine the criteria for selecting those schools which would be deemed as necessary small high schools in Oregon. It was felt that any money spent to improve education should not be spent in those high schools which should be included in some kind of consolidation or unification program. In other words, it was felt that it would be uneconomical to spend money in those schools which should not exist anyway. After several futile attempts to define a necessary small high school the committee abandoned this idea and made a decision to work for the improvement of any small high school that showed the necessary desire and interest.[12]

After considerable discussion, the following plan of action was accepted by the committee:

1. The 86 small high schools in Oregon that have an average daily membership of 200 or less will be asked to perform a self-evaluation using selected sections of the Evaluative Criteria published by the National Study of Secondary School Evaluation.

2. The State Department of Education personnel will tabulate the results of the self-evaluation.

3. Survey teams will check the reliability of the self-evaluation and visit the schools that they feel could carry on some kind of improvement or pilot program. These teams will include school board members, school clerks, representatives from I.E.D. districts, school districts, the State System of Higher Education, and the State Department of Education.

4. The evaluation teams will report to the Small School Advisory Committee those schools they recommend for improvement and pilot programs.

5. The committee will attempt to obtain funds (1) to assist selected school districts in implementing these programs and (2) to provide for expenses incurred by personnel of other small high schools in visiting and observing program schools.[13]

On January 28, 1965, the Advisory Committee met in Salem to discuss Oregon's application for membership into the Western States Small Schools Project. Suggestions were made of possible contributions Oregon could make to the Western States Project. At this time sentiment was running very high for joining the W.S.S.S.P. so an application was submitted to Dr. Bohrson, Project Coordinator, along with a list of possible contributions Oregon could make to the W.S.S.S.P.[14] In a short time after submitting their application, Oregon was notified by Dr. Bohrson that their application for membership had been turned down. The W.S.S.S.P. felt that by adding Oregon to their project they would be spreading their Ford Foundation money too thin and not doing adequately the job they set out to do in their five-state region.[15]

After receiving this news the Advisory Committee set out to find other possible sources of revenue in order to initiate some type of program. Their goal was to begin the program in the fall of 1965 so an all out effort was made to find financial assistance.[16]

Dr. Leon Minear made money available to hold a conference of administrators and school board members from small schools to generate interest in improvement programs and to explain the proposed plan of improvement. This conference was held at the Hilton Hotel on March 3 and 4, 1965. Dr. Robert King, Superintendent of Schools in Meeker, Colorado, talked about the improvement projects that are being carried on in his school in conjunction with Western States Small School Project. Representatives of the Northwest Association of Secondary Schools and the Standardization and Certification Sections of the State Department were available to answer the many questions that administrators and school board members had in these areas.[17] Regional meetings were held the next fall as a follow up to this meeting to further explain the program of improvement and to get the self-evaluation phase under way.

It is felt that it is extremely important to involve the participation of the school board members at all levels of the program. It is hoped that the board members and administrators of the state of Oregon working cooperatively can solve some of the problems that have baffled those who have worked in this area and result in much needed improvement in small secondary schools of Oregon.

The Oregon Small Schools Program was officially initiated in September 1965 using Title V funds in the Department of Education for the project administration, after several months of planning and activity by a study committee appointed by Dr. Minear. At this time Charles P. Haggerty, previously with the State Department of Education, was selected as Project Coordinator.

One of the first things Mr. Haggerty did as Project Coordinator was make some visits to other states. He first went to Utah and Nevada to visit

some schools in the Western States Small Schools Project. Then on to Texas to see the Texas Small Schools Project, the only other statewide program in the Nation other than Oregon. Mr. Haggerty said he was very impressed with the Texas Project and brought back many ideas. In fact he said that he patterned much of the Oregon Program after that of Texas.

During most of the first year, Mr. Haggerty worked on the organization and design of the program. He also took evaluation teams to schools that had completed their self-evaluations. In this first year he completed 19 of these small school evaluations.[18]

On May 15, 1966, a Title III ESEA grant was received from the U.S. Office of Education to provide funds for the operational aspects of the project which included summer institutes, regional in-service sessions, inter-school visitations, self-evaluations, and pilot projects in districts.[19] Also in July of this year, Donald Miller, principal of Dayton High School, a member school, was hired as assistant coordinator of the Program.

On July 1, 1967, the subcommittee of Ways and Means on Education directed that the Title V funds be reassigned to other purposes and that the administrative costs of the project also be transferred to Title III.[20] This meant that officially the project was no longer a Department of Education project, but one sponsored by the Baker County I.E.D., the project's physical agent.

In the first year of the program Mr. Haggerty and other persons involved in the program recognized the following problems of Oregon small schools, many of which have long been recognized in smaller schools and rural settings.

1. Multiple assignments for teachers.
2. High teacher turnover.
3. Low professional status.
4. Cultural limitations.
5. Limited choice of offerings.
6. Salary disparity.
7. High per-pupil cost.
8. Inexperience of staff.
9. Lack of student exposure to "The World of Work."

An additional problem is the lack of time and "know-how" to prepare applications and plan projects to take advantage of programs designed for their

salvation. In many instances the financial help is available, but the block of its use is the lack of expertise to do the initial planning.[21]

With these problems in mind program personnel developed the following list of prime project objectives:

1. To aid teachers in capitalizing on the low pupil-teacher ratio to more nearly attain true individualized instruction. This will be done through demonstrations and discussion of more effective teaching strategies and better use of technological advances.

2. To develop a high teacher morale as a prime target which will have a direct impact on the turnover and status problems.

3. To develop local and regional leadership through scheduled leadership training sessions.

4. To make school personnel more aware of information on the use of media, programed materials and their use, correspondence courses, and the learning package as a basis of the attack on several problems such as limited offerings, cultural limitations, multiple assignments for teachers, career information, and others.

5. To improve guidance services by providing information on effective programs and encouraging shared services.

6. To improve school and community relationships through the process of self-evaluation, use of paraprofessionals, liberal involvement of community resource people, and an expanded work experience program for high school youth, practically serving needs and demands of the community.

7. To provide up-to-date information on building construction and remodeling appropriate to modern instructional processes, where such construction is necessary and contemplated.

8. To relate to communities and school patrons a knowledge of modern needs in education as an attack on the factors affecting salaries and general budgetary support. This will be done by involving school board members and other community personnel in inter-school visitations, state school board meetings, and direct involvement in the on-going school program.

9. To provide experienced help for multi-district program design and ultimate application for funds from federal and other sources.

10. To further the recruitment of good teachers. It is proposed that this be done by expanding the responsible teaching (intern) experience to project schools by a cooperative effort with teacher training institutions; and through a better publicity and public-relations program.[22]

After developing the above objectives, the program set out to meet them by way of the following:

1. Regional in-service sessions for all staff members of all program schools.

2. General and specialized statewide conference and summer in-service sessions.

3. Special training sessions for subject-matter consultants from project schools.

4. Continued effort in the program of self-evaluation, using the N.S.S.S.E. 1960 Criteria.

5. Direct and indirect consultive service to schools for local program design and implementation.

6. Pilot programs in project schools.

7. Inter-school visitation.

8. Demonstration teaching--both direct and by video tape.

9. Centralization and redistribution of information on successful methods, materials, and procedures used elsewhere via video tape, films, publications, tapes, filmstrips, and slide collections.[23]

Of all these many and varied activities of the program, according to the program directors, the statewide in-service sessions and the pilot projects have been most successful in dealing with the problems in Oregon's small schools. In-service sessions are held for all small school administrators and staff members. These conferences have been held on a statewide and regional basis. Exploring such topics as administrative structure or time allotments, various teaching strategy and subject -centered small group sessions. In addition, the program has trained a core of group leaders in all subject areas to act as consultants to local districts and help with the statewide in-service sessions.[24] The statewide summer institutes have been held on the campuses of the University of Oregon, Linfield College, and Willamette University. A core of top educators from around the Nation were brought to these sessions to help Oregon small school educators explore all phases of innovations peculiar to small schools.

As a result of this wide exposure staff members and administrators in Oregon's small schools then went to work to implement various innovations that would be advantageous to their school and community. Each school and community

has its own unique problems. Therefore a wide variety of pilot programs have been developed.[25] Some of the most successful of these projects are the Modular Scheduling with Individualized Instruction and Independent Study at Mohawk High School in Lane County. This is a schedule comprised of 18 twenty-minute modules. The purpose of this program is to give the student an opportunity to use instructional materials center, allow student to progress at his own rate in accordance with his ability, and allow student to enroll in more electives. Another successful project is the Automated I.M.C. and Library Processing Project at Santiam High School in Mill City. This project is to provide a model of automated library and I.M.C. processing for small schools. Its purpose is to automate library processing from purchasing through preshelving; to provide automated subject, author, and title lists; and to provide automated reference lists including pamphlets, films, tapes, records, etc.[26] There are some 25 other ongoing projects throughout the state but space in this paper limits their description.

Evaluation of the program by member schools has been very favorable. Dr. Arthur G. Wakley, Principal, Concordia High School, a nonpublic school in the program, said, "The Oregon Small Schools Program has been a source of great benefit to us in our Lutheran secondary school. It has given us the opportunity to speak with others who are involved with schools of comparable size to learn of innovative practices which have proved beneficial."[27] M. L. Morey, Superintendent of the Marion County Intermediate Education District, said, "I doubt if Oregon has ever mounted an effort to improve education that had such rapid and significant impact on target as the Oregon Small Schools Program."[28] "The Oregon Small Schools Program has been the most promising program to bring about change in Oregon schools in this decade," said John W. Campbell, Superintendent of Weston Public Schools.[29]

Program personnel have been most impressed with the change in attitude of the administrators and teachers in program schools. For instance, Harley Derrick, a social studies instructor at Pine Eagle High School, recently said, "When asked where I taught before we became a member of the Oregon Small Schools Program I would say I teach in a small school near Baker, but now I am proud to say I teach at Pine Eagle High School in Halfway, Oregon."[30]

From the foregoing evidence it is apparent that the project has consistently directed its efforts toward the initial objectives and has achieved these purposes remarkably well, while at the same time establishing a pattern of improvement of rural and small school education that is exemplary, and indeed has pointed out the direction that other states of the Union may well follow if the effort to preserve the best in rural living is to be sustained in the Nation.

FOOTNOTES

1. Bohrson, Ralph G., "Small School Improvement," Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Feb. 1966, p. 53.

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14. Kontos, George, Status of Oregon's Request to Joint W. S. S. S. P., (Unpublished), January 1965.

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26. Allen, op. cit., pp. 21-22.

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